

## **Back Again, Back Again: Lessons Learned Before the Eligida Came**

CW: this episode contains the death of a loved one and descriptions of blood

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**Abigail Eliza, as the preroll:** Hello hello hello!! Back in the month of September, Back Again, Back Again got entered into the Audioverse Awards, and I said that if it became a finalist in any of the categories, I'd release the Cassian bonus episode. I did not actually expect to make finals nor to do this episode.

But guys – thank you so so much for voting, holy shit, because Back Again, Back Again is a finalist for not one but two (!!!!) awards!!! It would mean the world to me if you voted for this show for Best Existing Production and Best Recurring Voice in an Existing Production. The link to do that, if you'd like to, will be in the episode description. Voting not only helps you recognize all your favorite shows for the stuff they've been doing, but it helps new people find the shows, as well!! So tell your friends!! Tell your acquaintances!! Tell your coworkers!! Tell your enemies!! Go vote!

Also, if Back Again, Back Again wins something, we'll not only do a four episode month the month following the awards – double the episodes! – but another bonus episode – this one, with the whole gang, very low stakes, and lots of bonding. No emotional damage.

But speaking of emotional damage – here's that Cassian bonus episode. It's a lot, so please be sure to check out the content warnings in the description.

And anyways – thank you all so so much again!! And here we go!

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Once upon a time, there was a prince named Cassius Rex. Cassius had neither always been named Cassius nor perceived as a prince, but he'd become stronger for the change and stronger for the love he was shown during it.

This story is not about that change, though. There are stories about that and we know this one ends well – there is nothing gained from rehashing the struggle. This is more about the *prince* part – the *becoming of* and the *growing up*. You see, dear one, when he was young, his father would pick him up under his arms and swing him round in circles; when he was young, his mother read to him late at night stories of his parents' parents' parents'; when he was young, he had all of one friend who was as much his sister as his schoolmate and all of one tutor who tried fiercely to remind him that people were not made for war and nothing else.

You see, dear one, when Cassius was much younger than the seventeen he was when his world changed and he made himself into the image of a prophecy, he didn't doubt this. He didn't even try to make sense of it, to understand how people could think otherwise – how could he, when there was poetry and music and starlight? How could he, when the palace gardener tried to cut down the patch of wildflowers that never seemed to leave the roots of the great ancient tree so he lay down in them so they couldn't be destroyed, spreading his limbs as wide as he could to protect them? He'd been taught another word, then, for them – by the gardener, laughing, putting away their shears and helping Cassius pick bits of grass from his hair – *frets-flors*. (*They're brave*, they'd said, *like you, staging a*

*protest to stop me*). How could he have possibly believe that people were meant for war and nothing else when people had put so much divinity into things like sugar scones, when they'd created holidays like poets' nights – where the whole purpose was to wear big silly hats and your strangest clothing and eccentrically decorated masks – where the whole purpose was to share stories and laugh and make friends? There was more. There was more to life. Of course there was.

However, people are not all made from the same mold. People do not live forever, either, and so when his teacher died and he found himself spending not just an hour or two in drills but most of his days with the woman he called *ensoldat*, out of respect, though he knew her name was Hildegarde –well. He suddenly understood, though he'd never have the chance to tell his late teacher, how some people had *become* made for nothing else.

There was refuge, though, because when there are new situations and new people and an end to a nearly lifelong isolation one can always find refuge, especially in others. See, there was another boy – of course, there were many boys, these were child soldiers – but one in particular. If you put a group together, even if you train them all their life, there will always be a few that are not very good at their jobs. This boy – Antares – was not a very good soldier.

Of course, at the time, neither was Cassius.

This is the story of a prince, the first time he fell in love, and how he almost learned how to be more than something you had *become* made for. You know where this story picks up, dear one. Do not expect too much.

Their first conversation was anticlimactic. In the years that followed, Cassius always tried to remember it as something greater than it was – a way to preserve the boy he'd

known and the boy he'd loved a little more than he'd expected to. But he was fiercely logical even for his sentimentality, and as much as he tried to remake the moment in his mind, it stayed firmly put.

It went something like this: Hildegarde ran a tight ship, and breaks did not come so much in the form of *allotted periods of rest* as much as *periods of gasping for breath as she got a little fed up with their age group and shouted across the arena at one of the active and actually competent soldiers to come over so she could knock them around for a proper demonstration*. This had been one of those times – one of Cassius's new friends, a boy named Tavius who was frighteningly good at sucking in his cheeks in the exact same way Hildegarde did when she was mad, had been unfortunate enough to lose spectacularly in one of their practice sparring sessions. Cassius hadn't been surprised – though Tavius was one of the best fighters of their cohort, he'd been looking closer and closer to being properly sick into the sand all morning.

Unfortunately, his shakiness had been singled out as incompetence rather than illness. Unfortunately – or, *fortunately*, it varied from day to day in Cassius's mind whether or not this meeting had been a blessing or a curse – Cassius and Antares stood at the front, side by side despite not having talked in the four months Cassius had been there. Hildegarde, done with knocking around the other soldier in a *proper demonstration* of the technique they were meant to be focusing on, had laser-focused back in on Tavius.

Well, almost. She caught the two of them, side by side, and turned it into an opportunity. Three birds (three stupid soldiers-in-training), one stone. Pointing at Cassius and Antares, she said, *even they could have defended themselves better, and they're pathetic. What does that make you?*

Tavius, in an admirable defense of his own worth, took that moment to finally throw up onto Hildegard's boots. She'd made that glorious cheeks-sucked-in-sharp-anger face, and that was all it had taken for their cohort to descend into fits of laughter.

The boy had taken the moment to turn to Cassius, amusement rather than embarrassment quirking on his lips. *Hi, pathetic. I'm Antares.*

*Cassius Rex*, Cassius had said, still spitting out his whole and proper name every time for the newness of it. He couldn't fault Hildegard for calling him such – she was right, and it was nice to be an equal among his classmates, even if it came at the expense of some of his pride. *Pathetic, I suppose, to my friends.*

*Bit grim*, Antares said. *Cassian, instead, maybe?*

Cassius Rex – Cassian – felt his heart lurch at that. *Cassian. Yes. Cassian would be fine.*

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There is not much about quiet friendship that cannot be found in the stories of poets much more talented than I, dear one. I don't need to expound the way something catches in your throat when they smile at you or the glow in your chest that becomes so strong, looking at someone else, that it's a miracle the rest of the world doesn't see. Antares was not much of a fighter, but Cassian knew – Cassian *knew* – that people were not meant to be made for war and nothing else. Antares was not much of a fighter, but gods above, he was a dreamer, and Cassian snuck down to his cohort's barracks and scaled the bunks up to Antares's so many times in the months that followed just to hear the things Antares would come up with that eventually Tavius, unfortunately situated in the bunk below them, would kick at the plank above him until Cassian popped his head over to apologize. It was always easier received when Cassian was the one to speak up – hard to begrudge a prince, hard to

say no to a smile that dazzled, even in the dim light, and the two of them took advantage of it for as long as they could, Cassian staying the night and barely sneaking out before dawn.

Eventually Cassian was caught – of course he was, he'd never needed to learn the art of *sneaking* as a prince, where questions of *where are you going* or *what are you doing* could even be asked by maybe three total people in the palace (Rhia, his parents) and he was really only beholden to answering two of them (his parents).

Fortunately, as captain of the guard, Hildegarde was not put on watch – especially over something as menial as the children's barracks – with any regularity. Cassian was used to breezing past whatever teenager had been assigned their dorm and receiving either a fond hair-ruffle or a sleep-startled *uh – salve, rex* – in return.

Unfortunately, *not put on watch with any regularity* did not mean *never ever put on watch*. Cassian came down the stairs one night to find Hildegarde sat in the guard chair, languid, legs stretched across the doorway. She flipped through a book and looked decidedly unamused.

To her credit, the conversation started out much the same way. *Salve, rex*, they drawled. *And what are you doing out of bed so late?*

Cassian, unexpectedly caught and unexpectedly shamed, had given a very lofty, *I am not beholden to answer you*.

Hildegarde, completely unbothered, had stood up and snatched one of his ears between her fingers with the hand not encumbered by her book. *Yes, you are*, they said. *Try again*.

Cassian mentally updated the tally in his head (*four people that could ask him, three that actually demanded a response*) and sputtered – *to see a friend. To see – friends*.

They said, very calmly, pulling him back up the stairs, *don't be embarrassing. Make better friends. Tavius, maybe. Senix, definitely. Now go to bed. You will be an hour early to the arena and you and I will train until your cohort shows up.*

Cassian did go to bed. Cassian did meet Hildegarde early to lunge around with a sword weighted for someone much stronger than him. Cassian did, to his credit, in the days that followed, put more effort into making better friends with Tavius, who gave Cassian more pointers to fix his defense in a morning than he'd picked up on his own in months, and Senix, who, while really not one for words, had a comforting fondness for bumping up against her friends like a cat.

They were both the best in their cohort. Cassian, with extra training and talented friends, soon could no longer be justifiably called *pathetic* in a lesson again.

Antares watched, of course. His eyes were miles deep and they did not ever seem to leave Cassian.

And Cassian did not forget him. That glow still hummed his chest, caught in his throat, every time their gazes caught. He was glad that the rest of the world couldn't see it. He was fearful, always, always, that somehow, the other boy could.

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It took him too long to work up his confidence to approach Antares again. While he wanted to please Hildegarde (oh, he did, wow, did he want a parental figure to look on him with nothing but admiration, and she sadly did kind of seem like his best bet), he missed the stories and couldn't stop feeling bad about the longing eyes Antares kept hitting him with during training. So – he stood in just a position, during one of their Hildegarde-free training sessions (the captain of the guard was across the arena, audibly grinding her teeth

at the cohort a year below theirs), that when one of the teenage soldiers paired them off for drills, he got put with Antares. And when another one of the teenage soldiers asked one of the pairs to stay behind to clean after lessons, Cassian didn't hesitate to raise his hand to volunteer the both of them.

Cassian was fifteen by this point. Antares, the oldest of their group, was sixteen – which still did not feel quite right, quite real, because he was shorter than even Cassian by a good few inches and still had that wide-eyed look of someone not quite accustomed to the world yet. *Dreamer eyes*, Cassian called them in his head.

Cassian had to be the one to break the silence, because he'd been the one to leave. *You haven't much improved*, he began, meaning to be jovial, but that was exactly the wrong sort of thing to say. Antares's shoulders went up, his mouth going thin as he stacked training blades on racks.

*And you have, rex. Did you want to make sure I'd noticed?*

Yes, Cassian said, meaning *yes, I want to be noticed by you* but missing his point completely and coming off more the asshole for it. He backtracked, stumbling to try and come up with something that didn't just make the situation worse. *Yes, Res, I have gotten better. At least, I like to think.*

*Hmm*, said Antares. *Has that made you busy?* The implication, of course, was *too busy for me*, and Cassian made a careful tally of the words unsaid and a careful-er, more secretive tally of the way his heart reacted to them.

*I hadn't meant to. Stay away.* Answering the question Antares had meant to ask, not the things he'd said. That should have been good enough – *princes do not say sorry*,



Hildegarde snapped, and even here Cassian was loathe to break that rule, so he added – *I don't want to again.*

Antares finished cleaning up in silence. Cassian helped, careful not to get too close, holding his breath until the other boy said – *meet me by the Enarbol, if you mean it. Tonight.*

*Tonight*, Cassian agreed, even though he knew tonight was a banquet night and there were foreigners visiting and that that one laird's son, that blonde boy with the rat face, was going to corner him and talk his ear off until someone else dragged him away. Even though he was loathe to disobey his parents in any capacity, even when it came to unspoken rules like *no leaving early to sneak off to meet soldier boys*. He – could get out early. For Antares, he would find a way. Maybe – if he was lucky – no one would even miss him.

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In the grand hall, chandeliers dripped candle wax onto the heads of dancers and courtiers and performers hired for the occasion. Couples whirled in the glow and stood stiff and formal in circles around his parents. Rhia, in the seconds before he'd left, had been at sharp attention at the queen's side, trailing behind his mother like there was an invisible chain wrapped between the two of them. Cassian had passed by her room – of course, she hadn't known he was there as he did, it had been too long and too much had happened for it to be easy for him to walk inside like he'd used to – to hear her reciting to herself the poem his mother had picked out for her, halfheartedly leaning into the rhythms. Now, at the celebration following the banquet, Cassian knew that Rhia's proximity meant it was almost time for her to speak. He knew that the poem would draw eyes and attention – hopefully enough that maybe – *maybe* – no one would notice the crown prince of Rhysea making a hasty retreat into the courtyard.

Maybe.

Rhia climbed the stage. Her voice rang out, strong and clear, and as eyes turned and people gathered and his mother, surveillance mode, did not let her gaze stray from his almost-sister, checking for mistakes, Cassian turned, purposefully, and strode back the way he came. Cassian was still very bad at sneaking. He'd learned, though, how much power there was in pretending he had the right of way.

Through the hallways and out into the courtyard, where the *Enarbol* sat and waited and hummed and hummed and hummed in the way all trees do, if one bothers to listen. Circling the tree, once, twice, looking for Antares, before a figure finally slid from the dark.

Antares did not have the privilege of royal blood or even enough particular talent to pave his way. He was very good at sneaking. He melted from the dark, from the garden beyond the tree, and tilted his head towards Cassian. He did not smile, though Cassian did, strangely hesitant for the first time in years.

The two sat between two exposed roots, careful not to touch, around the backside of the tree. There was the faint noise of the party behind them, clinking glasses and sharp laughter and musicians tuning – Rhia must have finished already, Cassian did not have much time –but it did not break the peace that fell outside. Stars shone. The *Enarbol* whispered and sighed and rustled its leaves. The flowers under Cassian's fingertips – *frets-flors* – were cool as they let go of the last of the day's heat, preparing, like the rest of them, for the night ahead.

Cassian dared to speak first. *It's good to see you*, he said, and that was all it took for Antares to break his act and slam into Cassian for a hug.

Cassian buried his face into the crook of Antares' neck. He breathed in deep the other boy's smell, salt and lye soap and moonlight, and squeezed him back.

*I'm sorry*, Cassian said. This time, being touched like this, he was able to forget how he'd been banned from the words. He said them again, just to prove that they could exist. *I'm sorry. I'm sorry. It won't happen again.*

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It didn't. Cassian kept his friendships with Tavius and Senix and the others they'd made friends with in turn. He continued to practice with Hildegarde in the mornings, treating her with the respect he knew they deserved, but when Cassian chose Antares first for the casual patrols their cohort had started being sent on or slid in beside him at the evening meals he took twice a week with his soldiers, Cassian did not tolerate disapproval from Hildegarde. He was the prince, after all. He was everything he was supposed to be. He could have this, too.

And – the captain of the guard didn't say a word against him. That first time he'd dared to call Antares' name, he'd met their eyes, steady and sure, ready for challenge, but she'd just – smiled thinly and gave a single, sharp nod of their head. Whether or not they approved, Cassian had made the decision like a prince – like a king – and that had been the thing she'd wanted most out of him. Surety of his place in the world.

And – with that approval, they'd both gotten bold. Cassian stopped sneaking down and instead came to collect Antares for walks around the palace grounds. He picked bouquets of wildflowers and dried them upside-down to leave in the boy's trunk or at the end of his bed or on his pillow. He let Antares pull him, joyously, through his life, card games and company for the watches he was put on outside of the youngest cohorts' barracks. Life

turned glorious as Cassian turned sixteen – they celebrated with honey cakes, him and Antares, the party that was meant for Cassian raging inside the ballroom and the two of them sat tucked into the roots of the *Enarbol* – but, of course, dear one, times like that don't last forever. Sixteen was the age child-soldiers lost the modifier, and as Cassian, the youngest of his cohort, turned sixteen, their group received their adult swords, engraved with their names if nothing else (Cassian had gotten his a year early, a gift from his parents for his remarkable turnaround with his swordsmanship), a complete set of armor, and adult vocations. Surely, they were divided into fighting units and slowly, they were sent out on raids.

It is important to note, dear one, that adulthood does not grant one extra knowledge or skill. It is also important to note that even when a fighting unit functions as such – a unit – not all soldiers are equal within it. Some have the privilege and protection of princehood. And some, despite being born for war and nothing else, never turn out to be very good soldiers at all.

I do not know how much of what comes next is worth accounting – not for lack of importance but because we all can hazard a guess at where this story ends. Antares was good at telling stories and sneaking into the kitchens and pulling on Cassian's curls in a way that suggested an affection even a talented storyteller couldn't ever succinctly name. He was good at calming the younger children down when summer thunderstorms rolled through and smiling through the hard stuff, the parts that hurt Cassian even years down the line. He was good at making his prince laugh, not out of amusement but delight. He was very good at making Cassian's heart stutter like it hadn't in all of the years before he'd turned sixteen.

He was not good with a sword. He was not good at confronting people he did not already know.

Where could this story have gone, had Antares been better? Maybe by the time the prophecy comes into play, Cassian seventeen and hoping, hoping, hoping as he hears of the *Eligida*, that she is the same age as him, that destiny has not passed him by, Antares could have helped him move past that. Maybe Cassius Rex would have been okay with *Cassian*, full stop, *Cassian of Rhysea*, *Cassian the-true-and-brave-and-strong*.

But – you know where this story picks up, dear one. Cassian had meant what he said, that night at the *Enarbol*. *I'm sorry. I won't leave you again*. He'd meant to keep that promise the rest of his life.

It's – just –

It's impossible to keep, of course, when one dies young.

It shouldn't have been a bad raid. It was Cassian and twelve others, a good number, a dozen plus one more for luck, and it was supposed to be a check-up. They were to make sure the rebels had cleared out, that the townspeople were calm, and that nothing important had been burned. They found, however, the raggedy group still packing.

Cassian couldn't remember who struck first. He couldn't remember who even *struck* Antares – he'd been too busy focusing on his screaming lungs and shaking muscles to see, but he'd just turned around in time to hear a strangled cry of – *Cas* – to see Antares, on the ground, one of the rebels over him with their sword raised.

*No*, Cassian roared, but he was too far away and he was not magic. He could not stop their actions with a whisper or word. So the blade slunk, right down, into Antares's chest,

and Cassian, too caught up in his own fight to have turned around sooner, was too late to stop them.

Somehow he made it across the clearing, blind terrified haze, and fell to Antares' side. Tavius and Senix found their way over, cutting their way through, back to back, but Cassian could hardly process them as he fell. There was just Antares, choking, chest turning red too quickly, and Cassian was on his knees beside him.

*You're not allowed to go,* Cassian managed, voice already thick around tears. *No. No. I said I wouldn't leave you behind. Not again.*

Antares tried to smile. *There's always the next life. Find me there.*

*That's not fair,* Cassian said. *Res. Res, no. That's not fair.*

This was a moment that Cassian, in the few years that followed, tried desperately to remember as less than it was. Some things about people – stupid, sideways of romantic – stuck in your brain. Like nicknames you kept after their givers were gone and the way you tied your boots and opening strategies to card games that required you to think five steps ahead. And some things about people – the important things, the things that would make your chest crumble if you actually let them sit in your head – those are easier to try and forget.

This was one of the times Cassian wanted, so badly, to forget.

Antares lifted his head and pressed a kiss, feather-light, against Cassian's lips. *See you someday. Don't make it soon.*

Cassian held Antares as his heart stopped.

The battle ended, sometime after that. The clanging of swords and shouting became footsteps running away, became labored breathing, became silence. His soldiers – his

*friends* – circled around him, waiting for orders from their prince. Their prince knew, in the back of his head, that he was supposed to be getting up now. He was supposed to do a damage report. He was supposed to guide his soldiers.

*Lead, little prince.* Maybe it was Hildegarde's voice in his ears. Maybe it was his mother's. Maybe it was his own. *Get off the ground. Stop bowing before someone that was so far below you.*

*No*, he thought. *No*.

But there were people waiting for him to lead. And Cassian would always have to be a prince first.

It was what he was made for. There was no use trying to be something more than what you were made for.

He stayed on the ground and allowed himself five deep breaths. Cassian tried to wipe tears from his face with the backs of wrists, then nearly wretched as his palms still somehow managed to smear blood across his cheeks. Cassian steadied himself, chest tight, wanting to scream and scrub at his skin until there was no trace of what had happened still on him.

But he had to be a prince, first. So Cassian stood, and as calmly as he could manage, said, *burn their bodies*.

Tavius's shoulders hunched. *Cas?*

Cassian did not look at Antares' body, but he felt every muscle tense. *Not him. Don't touch him. The rebels. Burn them.*

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I told you, dear one. I told you not to expect too much. We know where this story picks up, and Antares is not there to see it.

Winter set in and Cassian learned to sleep on his own again. Spring came around and he had gotten used to the raids, had gotten good at pushing his advantages, maintaining a cool head. By the time the summer arrived, Cassian turning seventeen and beginning to hold his breath and hope for the prophecy to come true in his lifetime, he'd gotten very good at forgetting that, sometimes, the role people pushed you into was not the one that was good for you. Doubt, after all, was for people not born as kings. It is so drilled into them, that idea of glorious destiny, that they cannot help but believe in it.

By the time the Eligida had arrived, Cassian did not doubt again. He knew what doubting got you. And by the time his soldier began coming along on raids, trailing and uncertain, with even less time spent with a sword in her hand than Antares had, Cassian had gotten very good at turning around before the people he loved could fall.

But you know this part, dear one. What is there to say? There's not a lesson. There's not one that ever really mattered, in the end. All the work was undone before it even really began.

[FX: The whirr of the cassette machine fades out. "Nightingales" once more fades in, just as cheerfully.]

**Abigail, as the outro:** Back Again, Back Again is written and produced by me, Abigail Eliza. If you're enjoying the show, please consider leaving a review on your podcast platform of choice or supporting Back Again, Back Again on Patreon at



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If you've made it this far, thanks for sticking around. Please remember that this world always tries to make you feel more alone than you truly are. There are people out there that will love you without condition or expectation, and you will find them. The light-soaked days are coming. I promise.

You are so, so very loved. I hope you have a wonderful day.